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Books

Voice of sanity

SECRETS, SPIES AND SCHOLARS

By Ray S. Cline.
Acropolis. 294 pages. $10.

This is that uncommon double, an excellent history book which also carries useful indicators for current and future policies. It is by a leading American intelligence officer who rose to be a deputy head of the CIA, is currently a professor at Georgetown University and who has been tipped as one candidate for the post of head of the CIA in the Carter administration.

He begins at the beginning, with the creation in 1941 in Washington of the Office of the Coordinator of Information, renamed in the summer of the next year the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) under "Wild Bill" Donovan, who learned much from the British Special Operations Executive and picked up SOE's Buchanite romantic libertarian tone. Several of OSS's parties operating in occupied Europe and Asia attracted publicity, not to say hullabaloo, when they came back. The author points up a much more important, and much less noticed, side of OSS's work, also derived from British practice, though less ostentatiously. This was the setting up of an official structure that collected, collated and co-ordinated intelligence about world events, and then presented the results in palatable form to the makers of American strategy, the president and the chiefs of staff.

After an embarrassed postwar interval, the OSS became the Central Intelligence Agency in 1947. CIA, like OSS, included an active operations as well as an active intelligence branch; and, just as with OSS, the operations hogged all the publicity. In its golden age, in the 1950s, the CIA overthrew Mossadegh in Iran and Arbenz in Guatemala, two not very formidable opponents; it failed to topple Sukarno in Indonesia, a fact much less widely known. "These covert political actions", Mr Cline writes, "were justified at the time but the romantic misconceptions as to the role and capabilities of CIA which they gave rise to were disastrous." Sensation followed sensation; people from all sorts of walks of life were keen to join the show, though "most of the agency employees had absolutely no first-hand knowledge of any activity more hazardous than driving to work each morning". Meanwhile, all the time, quiet men and women were beavering away in the background, building up a comprehensive body of intelligence about the United States's enemies, actual and potential, and about its possible and actual friends. When for example the operational fiasco of the Bay of Pigs led to public disgrace and worsened relations with Cuba, the intelligence side of the CIA was able to reveal Khrushchev's plan to install nuclear missiles there, and so reflect some public disgrace on Russia in the worst scare, short of war, the world has yet been through.

This coolly and collectedly written book's main contention is that "scholars and spies can give to our [American] national strategy the enormous benefit of objectivity if, but only if, our national leaders are disposed to protect [an] open society by maintaining and using, not abusing, a sophisticated secret intelligence service". Mr Cline then argues that on information, properly assessed, policy can be properly founded. The author has himself spent much of his life in the "inherently addictive" business of collating and assessing information: "I quickly learned that controlling the newsbreaks, whatever the source, is the best entrée to the great men, who like to be up to date even more than they like to be well briefed".

"Most books on the subject of intelligence operations", he adds, "are garbage". This book, like Donald McLachlan's "Room 39", is by someone who has practised the art himself and really understands what he is writing about. As a scholar, Mr Cline puts up a thoroughly convincing case for applying the standards of scholarship rather than politics to the business of intelligence. He left that business himself while Lyndon Johnson was president, because he felt that LBJ's regime took too much notice of politics, and too little of the evidence. In the period of confusion that followed under President Nixon, when jumped-up jackanapes from California were using the White House's name for nefarious purposes, the CIA got drawn far aside from its proper and valuable aims, into illegal and indefensible activities which have brought it into its current unpopularity.

Though it is under a cloud, the cloud can pass. Those who denounce the agency as a new Gestapo, and clamour for its abolition, are some of them people of good intentions and liberal mind; some are conscious or unconscious tools of Soviet communism. Of course the CIA is anti-communist; so is the USA. Is anti-communism a crime? Is it even, faced with the nasty reality of communist-dominated life, a mistake? Mr Cline estimates the strength of the communist block's intelligence forces as high as half a million people. Is it to anyone's advantage, save the communists', that the Americans should operate in the international arena without the backing of an adequate intelligence service?

To make that service adequate, in Mr Cline's view, the CIA should work much more publicly; should be subject, to fit in with constitutional law, to review by congressional committee and should make its surveys and estimates much more widely available for discussion by the learned public. Considering the vast number of supposed secrets that are already in published print, this is a straightforward and useful idea.